Negotiation for release of Indian hostages

1682. SHRI ABANI ROY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to. state:

(a) whether Government are aware of Indian nationals held hostages in Iraq;

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) whether Indian embassy is the negotiator for the release of Indian hostages; and

(d) if not, what efforts have been made to get the release of hostages?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) On the night of 21st July, 2004, it was learnt from a news agency report that three Indian nationals identified as Antaryami Bains, Tilak Raj and Sukhdev Singh were among the seven persons taken hostages by an Iraqi group identified as "The Holders of the Black Banners".The hostages included in addition three Kenyans and one Egyptian. They were all employed as heavy vehicle drivers by the Kuwait based company, Kuwait and Gulf Link Transport Co. (KGL). The kidnappers in a statement reported by the media demanded withdrawal of all citizens belonging to the countries of the hostages from Iraq including troops and an end to the activities of the transport company in Iraq. The group threatened to behead a hostage every 72 hours unless these demands are met.

(c) No, Sir.

(d) Immediately after the hostage taking was reported, the Government initiated action forthwith to secure their release. Senior officials of the Ministry of External Affairs contacted Indian Missions in Baghdad and Kuwait to explore all possibilities to ensure safety of the hostages and their early release. Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs, Shri E. Ahammed spoke to the Charge d" Affairs in Embassy of India, Baghdad and the Indian Ambassador in Kuwait. A Crisis Management Group was constituted under the Chairmanship of Shri E. Ahammed, MoS and a Control Room was made operative in Ministry of External Affairs. Minister of External Affairs, Shri K. Natwar Singh, issued

an appeal to the kidnappers through Arab TV channel for release of the hostages who are innocent civilians and not combatants. The Government also contacted the Governments of Egypt and Kenya whose nationals are among the hostages for inputs to work for" the release of the hostages. Our Mission in Kuwait has been in touch with the transport company KGL from the very beginning of the abduction and received an assurance from the company to take all possible steps to ensure release and safe return of the kidnapped drivers. The situation is constantly being monitored by the Crisis Management Group which meets regularly and frequently to review strategies to secure safe and early release of hostages. Shri E. Ahammed, MoS has issued appeals to the kidnappers through Arabic TV network highlighting historical relations between India and Iraq and India's well-known and principled position and concern for the welfare and well-being of Iraqi people and their country and requesting for immediate release of the hostages. He also made an appeal to the captors in Arabic language for release of the hostages on humanitarian grounds. Religious leaders in Iraq and other Gulf countries were contacted to intercede for the release of the hostages. Ambassador of India in Muscat, Shri Talmiz Ahmad alongwith an Arabic interpreter has been deputed to Iraq to monitor and report on the developments and to assist in the work of the Indian Mission for early and safe release of the hostages. Cabinet Secretary has been regularly holding inter-Ministerial/ Departmental meetings to review the situation and the ongoing efforts to secure the release of the hostages. External Affairs Minister has been following developments closely and giving directions whenever necessary. The Prime Minister and the CCPA have also held meetings to review developments. Efforts are continuing to get their release. The deadline set by the kidnappers has been extended several times and the talks between the transport company KGL and the kidnappers through mediators are continuing.

Safety of Indians in Iraq

1683. SHRI UDAY PRATAP SfNGH: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the steps taken by the Government for the safety of Indian citizens in Iraq after some citizens of Indian origin were taken hostages in Iraq;